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Bad Things

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Bad Things

by

Miranda Khaye Lippold-Johnson

Report

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The members of my MFA cohort.

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Our brilliant cast and crew.

Bad Things

by

Miranda Khaye Lippold-Johnson, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

SUPERVISOR: Cynthia McCreery

This report summarizes the process of creating the short film *Bad Things*. It covers the writing process, pre-production, production, and post-production. *Bad Things* was produced as a graduate thesis film in partial fulfillment of a Master of Fine Arts degree in Film Production in the Department of Radio-Television-Film.

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CHAPTER ONE

In the Beginning

At the beginning of our 3rd year MFA Thesis class, our professor PJ Raval asked us to pitch. The first time, it was informal. *Stand up, say where you're at, what you're thinking about, tell us something.* That time, I stood up and I told my cohort about two ideas I'd been tossing around.

The first was a superhero story. All of my classmates know about my love of superhero stories, so this was expected. This one was a classic millennial tale, probably derived at some level from Bryan Fuller's short lived TV series *Wonderfalls*, which was about an over-educated, under-employed recent college-grad who moves home, works in a gift shop, and develops magical abilities. My version was about a girl who graduated at the top of her class at superhero school, but couldn't find a job because her superpower – being able to turn invisible – was seen as "creepy" by focus groups. Who wants a creepy superhero protecting their city?

The other idea was about a little girl who's obsessed with chemistry and decides to poison the school bully. That's where *Bad Things* came from.

At the next class, we were asked to do a more formal pitch – a presentation really. We were supposed to present ourselves, our work, and our next project. *It doesn't need to be formal, but it needs to be compelling. Why should we be interested in* you *making* this *movie?* I wasn't the only one who was intimidated by this assignment. For some of us, the idea of standing up in front of a group was already scary enough. But the idea of defining ourselves and our work – especially in front of a group that already knows us – was a daunting proposition.

There was a voice in my head that rebelled: *I can't do this! I'm in graduate school! Isn't the point of film school to make some stuff and see where it leads?* But the other voice in my head said: *don't be an idiot. Do the work of self-reflection or you'll run the risk of not knowing yourself.*

So I took the assignment seriously, and tried to come up with a hypothesis about myself as I was trying to shape the tiniest seed of a story. At first, there was a story about a young chemist who, for the first time, realizes she can have an effect on another person. This was interesting to me – that feeling, when you've done something mean and realize, really realize that you have the power to hurt someone else. It's a shock to the system. I remember being 8 years old well.

But then the story started to shift. I got interested in repercussions, in what it feels like to have done something bad – not just the realization, but the rationalization. *We've all done bad things. How do we live with ourselves?*

The story I pitched to the class was about a woman returning to the town where she grew up. It was about her attempt to justify her actions 20 years after she poisoned the school bully. It was dark and sad and took place at a high school reunion.

I told my peers that this was a departure in terms of tone and story, but it was not a departure from the conflicts and themes that have interested me in all my work. "The stories I've been interested in telling are stories about the negotiation between emotion and rational thought," I told them. My first film in graduate school, *Burn it to the Ground*, was about dealing with loss, applying (faulty) logic, and turning that feeling of hopeless loss into anger and blame. My pre-thesis film, *The Letter E*, was about someone trying to create order in her world through extreme

rationality and the problems that arose when her emotions conflicted with that rational order. “So, my next project is continuing with that same core idea,” I told them, “rational thought versus emotion, and how we try to use one to control the other.”

In this story, I would do the opposite of the previous film – it’s about rationalizing behavior that is purely emotional. It’s about doing something that doesn’t make sense and trying to make sense of it.

It took me a long long time to write *Bad Things*. The first complete version of a story that I presented to my cohort was just an outline. It was not the movie I would eventually make. It was about a woman named Sue Ellen Caraway and it started on a city bus. It was nighttime and she was in business casual clothes – her commute home. A man started to invade her space, ask her questions, ask if he could ask her something. We watch as she closes down, tries to ignore him. Then we see her explode, shoving him back with built up rage.

That Sue Ellen Caraway was in her late 30s, white, and was secretly taking birth control pills while telling her husband she wanted to get pregnant. The story was about her running away from her life and returning to the small town where she grew up. She returns to her old house, and we start to see memories of her and the boy next door. In the present day, people start recognizing her. “Psycho Sue,” they call her. We learn about her trying to befriend the boy, Byron Murphy, and we see him turn against her. We see him become brutal and mean. We see that her parents won’t help. In the present day, we follow Sue Ellen’s investigation – we find Byron Murphy and his family. Then we see what she did as an 8 year old. She brings him a snack: jam she’s made from berries in the woods. Daphne berries. They burn him and he begins to choke. In the present day, Byron Murphy is the town Sheriff. He comes to find her as she’s

realizing she should leave. He's disfigured by the poison. His lips look as if they've been burned. He tells her to go. She's no longer sure why she came. She leaves.

The story was uncomfortable and gross. There were moments of simple discomfort. Sue Ellen sits in the bar/restaurant in the town center and proceeds to cut up her stack of pancakes into tiny pieces, reducing it to mush. We watch her. There's a moment when she reaches out and touches Byron's disfigured lips. There was more brutality – in childhood Byron beats her, humiliates her, pees on her.

I was almost embarrassed to share it with my cohort. And they reacted strangely. One person said, "I feel like I'm not mature enough to understand what you're going for." Another person said they didn't understand the protagonist. They said "why would she do that? At the beginning, on the bus, only a crazy person would respond that way." I was kind of shocked by that, because to me, it seems entirely obvious that women who are constantly harassed by men on the bus are all on the brink of reacting that way. When I said I thought it was an understandable and relatable reaction, there was a strange silence. It was uncomfortable.

That's when I started thinking about violent women. Or, I started thinking about the violence involved in being a woman.

And that's also when the presidential election of 2016 took place. The election of Donald Trump was devastating in a way I can't quite remember now. It felt like the realization that I was hated. That people *hated* way more than I'd ever realized. Especially women. People hate women. That was what I learned that night in November of 2016.

After the election, a few things happened. The simmering depression I'd been harboring turned into a kind of apathetic rage. My animation professor gave us a lecture about how in times

of political upheaval, absurdist art becomes powerful. And the film I wanted to make began to change.

My mother, who has worked as a grant administrator for film, a festival programmer, and a documentary filmmaker, checks in on me with daily gChats. On November 11th, after a few lines of "how are you" and "bad" and "have you read this article," we had this exchange:

> Mom: what are you doing this weekend and how's your thesis proposal coming along?
>
> Me: i wrote a really bad draft of my thesis and we workshopped it in class yesterday and it was terrible
> people were just really confused by it
> and now i just don't feel like making it
>
> Mom: interesting
> I mean, you have to decide what to make of that feedback --
> which is the hardest thing
>
> Me: yeah
>
> Mom: do you feel more like ditching it and starting a new idea or still working with the same theme
>
> Me: i can't decide
> i might work with the same theme but a little tweaked
> have you read this yet
> http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/10/trump-election-autocracy-rules-for-survival/
>
> Mom: no, that's a good one
>
> Me: yeah
>
> Mom: did you read Garrison Keillor's?
>
> Me: no
> i think i want my thesis to be about the anger of being a woman
> but i don't know how to express that exactly

> Mom: THAT IS A VERY GOOD TOPIC TO EXPLORE
> like, finding one solid focus
>
> Me: yeah. i think the thesis i was writing before all of this was kind of about that, but it was also all over the place
> so maybe i can keep the character and kind of the story but focus it more
>
> Mom: yes! a short film is like a tiny essay
>
> Me: mmkay.

For the next month and a half, I thought (obsessively) about anger. I wrote and wrote and read and read and all of that turned into nothing. Or it turned into something as ephemeral as dust. I'm sure it informed what would become *Bad Things*, the film I actually made about an eight year old girl and her sister, but in the most obvious and true ways – it was completely irrelevant.

In the next chapters, I'll include some of that stage of obsession and unproductiveness. And then I'll move on to the film that actually became a film. The story of eight year old Sue Ellen is the one that I stand by and care about. She and Jackie, her older sister, and their mother and their life – they became real in a way I couldn't imagine back in December of 2016. It's not a movie about anger, even if it's about drastic action. It's about fairness. Because after all that thinking, I stopped caring about anger. Anger is unproductive. I never want to make a movie that leaves people with only anger. I want to make movies that leave people with understanding.

CHAPTER TWO

Run Your Hand Over It

"You run your hand over the race." Robert Irwin, the artist known for his subtle, experiential installations, explains his success as a gambler this way. He would learn all the facts, all the details of the horses and the history and the jockeys. He would load all of that information into his brain and add what he knew of human behavior. Then, he said, he would simply run his hand over it. Something would kick in. A secret ingredient, an intuitive response, an answer. Then he would place his bets. When art wasn't paying the bills, Robert Irwin survived as a professional gambler.

Professor Don Howard told me about this when we were sitting in a chilly editing suite this summer, reviewing a fine cut of my thesis film. To him, this metaphor felt relevant to his process as an editor. As you edit, he explained, you do all the right things. You build based on facts. You learn it all. You make sure it's all there. Everything is essentially done. You should have a conclusion. But then you run your hand over it one last time. And things jump out at you. That's where the magic is. You have to trust your brain to make sense of what you can't consciously uncover.

For me, this metaphor, in the bastardized way I chose to hear it, felt like how I wrote the script for *Bad Things*. I spent so much time loading information into my brain, churning through ideas and concepts and facts. Then I called all of that irrelevant and wrote a script. I'm taking this tangent, talking about Robert Irwin and gambling, to explain that this chapter is not a tangent. This chapter will include excerpts from what I spent that "unproductive" period doing. I

want to respect that stage, because without it, I wouldn't have had anything to run my hand over. When my intuition took over, it's this research that informed it.

Violent Women

I intellectualize things. It's something I do. Once something interests me, I read books, I learn about it, I get lost in research. The very first time I was supposed to present an idea for a thesis film, it was in Don Howard's class, and I baffled my cohort with a presentation on the history of superhero stories and why queerness and feminism were inherent to the genre. It was purely academic.

So once I'd found the grain of an idea that would become *Bad Things*, I went to the library. "I want it to be about the anger of being a woman," I'd said. And that's about all I had. The books I read were classic feminist media theory, like Elizabeth Cowie's tome *Representing the Woman: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, as well practical handbooks like *Writing the Short Film*.

Once I started to lose interest in general topics, the subject matter that drew me in was *the representation of violent women.* It wasn't something I'd consciously thought a lot about, but as I began to read, I felt like I'd been waiting for this research. *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema,* a short academic book by Janice Loreck, takes on the task of analyzing the representation of violent women in recent, highbrow films like *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009), *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) and *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), among others.

Loreck's research is based on an idea that is easy to accept: we (and I mean "we" as a generalization of Western culture) see femininity as antithetical to violence. Womanhood is

thought to be synonymous with pacifism and non-aggression. Violence is uniquely male. Historically, this was even thought of as a feminist view. *Women are different, better.* William Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman wrote "Women represent love. Men represent force." In his stories, women are biologically superior to men *because they are by nature nonviolent*.

The thing is though, women *are* sometimes violent. So how do we deal with that? "When a woman commits an act of violence," Loreck writes in her introductory paragraph, "her behaviour – indeed, her very existence – causes profound unease and questioning."

A violent woman breaks the rules, and in order to maintain our ever-precious gender norms, we bend rather than break. When a woman is accused of a violent crime, there are two options: either she is a victim of circumstance, or she is inscrutable, bizarre, and permanently beyond comprehension. The first option leaves her without agency, denying her her own personhood. The second option is well illustrated by a comment made by Amanda Knox's lawyer during her trial: he called her "a sorceress" with a "face like a naive doll." In this version, she is not quite human; she is a shape-shifting witch.

I won't dive too far into the evidence Loreck lays out – you should go read her book – but she demonstrates that film does this consistently. Violent women are subjects of fascination because they are seen as atypical, bizarre, and impossible. Films lean into that fascination by trying to explain how such a thing could be. And apparently, the only explanations are that these women have been victimized by (violent) men or they are *not actually women*. They are alien creatures; they've lost their humanity. Frequently, these two come together. *Antichrist, Kill Bill, Monster*: we move slickly between seeing these women as unhuman psychopaths and pitiable victims not responsible for their own actions.

It's not that these movies bother me. If there were more examples, a more diverse sample, I'd have no problem with movies explicating violence this way. But it's just so overwhelmingly predictable. I'm hard pressed to find a counterexample. I thought the *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010) might be different, but instead it swathes it young female assassin in a thick layer of impossibility. She's another *Hanna* (Joe Wright, 2011) – a freakshow attraction built by a violent man.

I don't believe women are peaceful and men are violent. I don't believe that women are innately superior or kind or anything at all. In part, I have faith in this being true because I was raised on writings of feminists. Gloria Steinem was a big Wonder Woman fan, but she had a problem with Marston's belief in the innateness of "female" qualities. "If that's the case," she wrote in her 1972 article, "then [women are] stuck with yet another social order based on birth." But it's also my own experiences that conflict with the media representation of violent women.

Growing up, my female friends were no less violent than my male friends. In 5th and 6th grade, it was the girls who would physically abuse each other, not the boys. I know myself. I know that around that age I had to learn not to kick, not to dig my nails into someone else, not to throw an elbow. I learned that. We all learned that.

So why can't characters on screen be like me? Like my friends? Complicated in their experience of violence, still human, still female. But that's the problem of media representation in general. As Bell Hooks said, offhand in one of the interviews that makeup her book *Reel to Real*, "We keep coming back to the question of representation because identity is always about representation." What is my identity if I am unrepresented? How can we know ourselves to be both female and capable of violence in a world where that is represented as if it were impossible?

Writing as Sue Ellen

At this stage in my writing process, Sue Ellen Caraway was a 38 year old woman who had made a mistake and it had ruined her life. She was also a woman with violent tendencies. She felt real to me, despite consistently being told she wasn't relatable. I wanted to get to know her better, so I started to write prose about her, sometimes in her voice. Without screenplay format, I thought I would discover something, that I'd be able to draw out a story. I've decided to include a few excerpts of what I wrote during this time of exploration. This character is not who I ended up with. I don't think the eight year old in the film will turn into this woman.

November 25, 2016

> Sue Ellen's Life Story:
>
> Sue Ellen was a shy but intense child. She enjoyed science experiments like burning leaves under a microscope and combining baking soda and vinegar. Her parents were supportive but absent most of the time. Her father worked as a truck driver and her mother worked at the little local grocery store.
>
> When she was 8, a new family moved in next door and they had a son who was just about her age. She spied on him and watched him and tried to befriend him. He was put off by her friendliness and bitter about his family's move, so he let her tag along as a suck-up, but when she started having opinions and ideas of her own, he started to turn on her.

November 22, 2016

> Notes:
>
> You tried to kill me.
> Did I? I was eight years old. According to the State of Texas, I did not know the difference between right and wrong.
>
> I'm not fucking crazy — do you know what it's like to be in a world where every day you have to be on the defensive, every day

November 11, 2016

Sue Ellen's Story, First Act

"Are you okay?"

Such a meaningless question, posed as if to express caring but actually minimizing the state of your being to a simple yes or no.

The correct answer is "yes." Years of acquaintances voicing concern have taught me that. The correct answer is "Yes, I'm fine!" No one who asks "are you okay," actually cares one way or the other, but answering "no" will make them realize they don't care, which will send them spiraling into guilt. It's not useful to answer "no." It's not useful for people to know that you're not okay.

I've also lost faith in the idea that anyone is "okay." I doubt that existence is fine for anyone. Some people claim to be happy, but I don't believe them. Certainly that emotion is just temporary or just a layer on top of something more treacherous.

So, no. I'm not okay. And that's okay. That's just fine. I can handle being not okay.

Separation is key. Finding the other half of you to rely on; finding the nods and the smiles and the easy conversation. I can fall into easy patterns of emotional response. It's like going home and watching TV until you can finally fall asleep. It's not hard to make it all okay.

The terror only comes when the separation slips. An unpredictable conflict, an unexpected interaction and the other half slips out. It bleeds. It explodes. Confinement has made it angry and it attacks. Sometimes its weapons are tears. Other times it attacks are more volatile, upsetting the balance in ways I don't understand.

I was on the bus. I was staring out the window, like I always do, letting the movement and the lights hypnotize me. Other passengers were minding their own business, reading and meditating. The man came up from behind me. "Hey," he said. "Can I ask you a question?"

My stomach tightened and my neck turned rigid. I maintained my gaze.

"Hey, hey lady."

The other passengers lifted their eyes, curious disinterest. I was on my own.

"Can I ask you something?"

> I could see him in the reflection. I watched as he lifted his arm, pointed his finger and tapped me on the shoulder.
>
> Spring loaded, my body unfurled with a roar. As if his touch had pressed a trigger within my arm, my shoulder flew backward and into his nose. The rest of me jumped up and away. I didn't want to be near him. I didn't want to touch him. I didn't want to feel the crack of his nose or hear the crack of his head against the pole behind him.

My Sister

I wrote draft after draft, screenplay after screenplay about this adult version of Sue Ellen. Each draft was extremely different while still being exactly the same. They didn't get better; it didn't feel like progress. Now, without clues like "version 15" on the title page, I wouldn't know which order I wrote them in.[1]

In December, I sent my sister one of these drafted screenplays. She used to read my English papers before I turned them in – give me notes and suggestions with a healthy dose of encouragement. She's creative and brilliant and ridiculously supportive of me and my creative pursuits.

She hated it. She *hated* the draft I sent her.

I didn't know it at the time, but after she read it she was plagued with uncertainty. Should she tell me how she felt? Should she not? All I knew was that it took her longer than normal to get back to me and when she did, her notes were *bad*. Like, really bad. They were bad in the sense that she didn't like anything about it and bad in the sense that they weren't helpful.

---

[1] This is all hyperbole. For months I *felt* like I wasn't making progress, but that's what I've learned: progress sometimes feels like being stuck in the mud. I add this footnote primarily as a reminder to myself.

I was irrationally hurt by this. Or maybe "hurt" isn't the right word. I was discouraged. I was somewhere between hurt and discouraged. I doubted myself in a way that scared and confused me. I've been around long enough to have gotten bad feedback before. I've taken mean, spiteful, terrible, discouraging notes, shrugged and gone on with my day. This was different. This was soul-shaking. Her disdain for something I found value in was one half insult and the other half depressing revelation: this is one more way we aren't the same.

This is the power of older sisters. This is probably why *Bad Things* became a movie about sisters. We expect everything from them; we see ourselves in them; we feel betrayed when they do something we wouldn't; we hear what they say too loudly.

Progress

And then one day in February I stopped. I stopped listening to that version of Sue Ellen's voice and I let her go. I stopped thinking about media representation and politics and Sue Ellen's violent tendencies. I stopped thinking. And I ran my hand over it one last time. Then I sat down and wrote a script about an eight year old girl and her sister.

CHAPTER THREE

The Story

The story I ended up writing is about an eight year old girl named Sue Ellen. She is smart and disciplined and a firm believer in the doctrine of hard work. Her family isn't well-off, but she's been taught that hard work and brains are all you need to get ahead.

Her older sister Jackie was taught that too, and for a while it seemed true. Their parents work hard, provide for them, and the girls have scholarships to an excellent private school not far from home. Then Jackie gets suspended from school. This is a failure, according to Sue Ellen. She didn't do as she was told, didn't work hard enough.

When Byron, one of Sue Ellen's classmates, starts mocking her, calling her sister a psycho, Sue Ellen is torn. She wants to stick up for her sister, but she also feels betrayed by her sister's failure.

Mr. Taylor is the reason for Jackie's suspension. Sue Ellen knows that from the beginning – the whole school knows. According to Byron, Jackie went crazy and attacked her teacher, Mr. Taylor. And he seems nice enough. He's the nice-guy teacher with his sleeves rolled up. Sue Ellen stops by his room after school to collect Jackie's homework assignments, which Jackie then refuses to do.

Spoiler alert. As the story continues, things get worse for Sue Ellen and Jackie. In the end, Jackie loses her scholarship to the school because of her suspension and Sue Ellen, fed up with Mr. Taylor and Byron and everything else, leads Byron into the woods, tells him to eat a poisonous berry, and as he begins to choke, she runs home to her sister.

I'm including the entire screenplay here.

Bad Things

Revision 2

By

Mira K. Lippold-Johnson

Version 4, Draft 10

April, 2017

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1 EXT. SOUTH AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON 1

This is a neighborhood where the transition between dilapidated buildings and McMansions is abrupt and uncomfortable. Little bits of farmland and forest scar the developed landscape.

An 8 year old girl in a school uniform runs. This is SUE ELLEN CARRIWAY. She runs with panic and fear, panting and desperate.

CUT TO BLACK

2 EXT. WOODS - AFTERNOON 2 *

A sunny day. A patch of woods. Sue Ellen looks up at her sister JACKIE. Jackie is 16, a teenager who's just on the brink of understanding the disappointment of adulthood.

Jackie holds both hands behind her back. They stare each other down. It's a game. A serious game.

SUE ELLEN
That one.

Sue Ellen gestures to Jackie's right hand. Jackie reveals what she was holding in that hand: SMALL RED BERRIES. Sue Ellen laughs.

SUE ELLEN
What! Okay, the other one!

Jackie laughs as she reveals the other hand's contents: ONE DARK BELLADONNA BERRY.

SUE ELLEN
Nooo. That's not fair! They're both poisonous.

JACKIE
Nuhuh, only this one will kill you. These will probably just make you poop.

SUE ELLEN
(laughing)
I'm not eating any of those!

Sue Ellen runs off. Jackie drops the berries and runs after her.

3 EXT. SOUTH AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOOD - EVENING 3

We're driving now, through the more remote part of the neighborhood. A housing development. A farm.

Then we see a car next to us - Sue Ellen holds her arm out the window, catching the wind. She smiles with her face in the sun.

Barely visible, Jackie is sitting in the back seat next to her. In the front are their parents: CHRISTINA (40, perpetually exhausted and determined not to show it,) and RICK (40, quiet and kind).

4 INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS 4

CHRISTINA
Get your head back inside before it gets knocked off.

Sue Ellen pulls back into the car.

RICK
Got a good head on your shoulders -- better be careful with it.

CUT TO BLACK

TITLES

CUT TO

5 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - LIVING ROOM/HALLWAY - NIGHT 5

We're extremely close to Christina's face.

CHRISTINA
You don't get to screw up.

We move back to reveal that she's yelling at Jackie.

CHRISTINA
You don't get to. What were you thinking?? Nobody's gonna give you a second chance or a second thought if you don't work hard and keep outta trouble. That's all you gotta do!

JACKIE
That's bullshit.

CHRISTINA
What did you say to me?

Rick steps into our view. He puts a hand on Christina's shoulder.

RICK
Let's all go to bed.

We're watching from Sue Ellen's perspective. She's peering from around the corner, eavesdropping out of sight.

6 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - GIRLS' BEDROOM - NIGHT 6

A bunkbed. The combined messes of an 8 year old and a 15 year old. Sue Ellen is in the top bunk when Jackie enters. Sue Ellen watches her. Jackie averts her eyes.

JACKIE
Stop looking at me.

Jackie takes off her bra and pants. She gets in bed.

SUE ELLEN
You're so stupid. You're a stupid idiot.

Jackie throws herself onto her bunk and goes to sleep.

7 INT. SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY 7

The classroom is colorful and bright and full of students. Sue Ellen stares through glass at the alum crystals she's growing.

Then, an intrusion:

BYRON
I heard your sister got expelled.

BYRON is a classmate, big for his age.

SUE ELLEN
No she didn't.

BYRON
Yeah, I heard she went crazy and attacked Mr. Taylor. They had to call the cops.

SUE ELLEN
Leave me alone, Byron.

BYRON
It's true though. She's a psycho.

SUE ELLEN
That's not what happened.

MS. HAYWORTH, the teacher, checks in:

MS. HAYWORTH
How are we doing over here?

SUE ELLEN
Good.

BYRON
Fine.

MS. HAYWORTH
What's one observation you've made that we can write down in our journals.

BYRON
They're really easy to break.

MS. HAYWORTH
Yes, they're still fragile, right? But they'll get stronger as they grow.

Sue Ellen finishes tying fishing line around a seed crystal. She drops it back into a beaker of solution.

Ms Hayworth moves to the next table:

MS. HAYWORTH
What about over here, what's something you've observed.

8 INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY 8

Most of the students have left for the day. Sue Ellen knocks on Mr. Taylor's door.

9 INT. SCHOOL - MR. TAYLOR'S ROOM - DAY 9

MR. TAYLOR collects a folder of handouts. His room is plain, stark. He's young and rolls up his shirt sleeves to the elbow. He's the cool teacher everyone wants.

MR. TAYLOR
Your sister is a good kid. I like her. I like all my students, but

MR. TAYLOR
you know - I think she has potential.

She just needs to learn a sense of *decorum*. You know what decorum means?

Sue Ellen nods as he hands her the homework: a pile of papers and a copy of The Age of Innocence.

MR. TAYLOR
It means being proper and decent.

Sue Ellen nods again.

MR. TAYLOR
This week we're reading up to chapter eight. Can you remember that?

Sue Ellen nods once again. Mr. Taylor doesn't believe her. He takes out a post-it and writes "Chapters 1-8" on it, then sticks it to the book. As he does this:

MR. TAYLOR
You know. It's very important, for a young lady to be proper and decent.

10 EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON 10

Sue Ellen leaves school. She has sweatpants on over her school uniform. She heads across a large field and toward the road home. Other students get picked up in fancy SUVs. She doesn't notice.

10A EXT. FIELD - AFTERNOON 10A *

Sue Ellen crosses a field and enters the woods - this is her route home. *

11 EXT. WOODS - AFTERNOON 11 *

Sue Ellen stops to eat blackberries. *

11A EXT. NEWLY BUILT NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON 11A *

Sue Ellen passes through a newly built neighborhood. *

11B EXT. CARRIWAY NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON 11B *

Her own neighborhood is less new, less nice. *

12 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - LIVING ROOM/HALLWAY - AFTERNOON 12

Sue Ellen unlocks the door and bursts through the living room. She kicks off her shoes and heads to her room.

13 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - GIRLS' BEDROOM - AFTERNOON 13

Sue Ellen comes into the bedroom, where JACKIE is reading and listening to music on her bed. Sue Ellen doesn't say hi. She leaves on her sweatpants but takes off the skirt and hangs it up -- this is her daily routine. Then she takes off her dress shirt and hangs that up. She leaves on her T-shirt and sweatpants. As she does this:

SUE ELLEN
Jackie. I got your homework.

JACKIE
What?

SUE ELLEN
I got your homework from Mr. Taylor.

JACKIE
Why?

SUE ELLEN
Mom said.

Sue Ellen starts pulling things out of her giant backpack.

JACKIE
I don't want it.

SUE ELLEN
You have to.

JACKIE
Don't pick up my homework for me Sue Ellen. I'm not going to do it.

SUE ELLEN
You have to!

JACKIE
No I don't.

SUE ELLEN
Yes you do!

JACKIE
Why.

SUE ELLEN
Because. You can't throw away your education.

JACKIE
Oh my god. You're like a tiny version of mom. Repeating everything she says. Someday you're going to realize that it's total bullshit.

SUE ELLEN
Don't swear! It makes you sound stupid.

JACKIE
Leave me alone, Sue Ellen.

14 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING 14

Sue Ellen sits with a bowl of cereal, getting her hair done. Christina pulls at her curls. A list of spelling words sits next to them.

SUE ELLEN
U-N-D-E-R-S-T-A-N-D.

CHRISTINA
Good. Persistence.

SUE ELLEN
P-E-R-S-I-S-T-E-N-C-E.

15 INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY - AFTERNOON 15

Class is over. Students pour out of the classroom. Sue Ellen exits with her big back pack. She's heading to Mr. Taylor's room. Byron stops her.

BYRON
Where you going?

SUE ELLEN
Leave me alone.

BYRON
Why are you always talking to Mr. Taylor. Did your sister send you to finish him off.

SUE ELLEN
No.

BYRON
You know he's my uncle right. He told me what happened. She's a psycho.

SUE ELLEN
That's not true!

BYRON
She's probably disturbed. All scholarship kids are messed up, you know. That's how you get in. It's like charity.

SUE ELLEN
Shut up!

BYRON
What. It's true. All scholarship kids eventually drop out. It's just a fact.

Nobody's going to be surprised when you do.

Sue Ellen doesn't know what to say so she just rams into Byron, slamming him into a locker.

16 INT. SCHOOL - PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - AFTERNOON 16

Sue Ellen and Byron sit next to each other. PRINCIPAL HIGGINS sits across his imposing desk. The parents have been called. MRS. MURPHY, Byron's mom, stands behind him with her hand on his shoulder. Rick and Christina stand behind Sue Ellen.

PRINCIPAL HIGGINS
We do not tolerate fighting.

BYRON
She started it. She just went crazy on me all of a sudden.

SUE ELLEN
No I didn't!

Sue Ellen is taken aback. She looks up at her parents for reassurance:

SUE ELLEN
That's not what happened!

They don't look at her.

PRINCIPAL HIGGINS
I don't want to hear excuses.

MRS. MURPHY
This won't happen again. Will it Byron.

PRINCIPAL HIGGINS
This time, this is just a warning. I'll expect you two to get along in the future. Mr. and Mrs. Carriway? I think we need to be careful about the example your older daughter is setting for your younger one.

CHRISTINA
This won't happen again. Will it, Sue Ellen.

17 INT. CAR - NIGHT 17

Rick drives. Christina stares out the window. Sue Ellen sits quietly in the back. They sit in silence.

RICK
It's okay, Sue Ellen. You're not in trouble.

More silence.

RICK
You just gotta try harder, be better. Okay? You gotta be better than those other kids.

Sue Ellen is miserable.

18 INT. SCHOOL - MR. TAYLOR'S ROOM - DAY 18

Sue Ellen is back in Mr. Taylor's room. This time he's got a stack of worksheets and is writing chapters on a piece of paper.

MR. TAYLOR
Now. She should have read through chapter nine. So she'll fill out this worksheet and submit a topic sentence for the essay, which will be due the week she comes back.

He hands her a pile of papers.

MR. TAYLOR
Sound good?

Sue Ellen nods.

SUE ELLEN
What did she do?

MR. TAYLOR
Excuse me?

SUE ELLEN
Jackie. What did she do?

MR. TAYLOR
She misbehaved.

19 INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY 19

Sue Ellen leaves Mr. Taylor's room and stops to try to fit the papers into her backpack. WHOOSH. The papers are gone. Byron grabbed them from her hands.

BYRON
What is this.

SUE ELLEN
Hey!

BYRON
Is this homework?

SUE ELLEN
Give it back.

BYRON
Don't you get it?

SUE ELLEN
Give it back please.

BYRON
You're so stupid.

Byron starts to rip up the homework.

SUE ELLEN
No!

He lets the pieces fall to the floor as she pushes him out of the way.

BYRON
It's not like it matters.

20 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - GIRLS' BEDROOM - AFTERNOON 20

Sue Ellen sits on the floor piecing together the ripped up homework and taping pieces back together. There are a lot of pieces. It's a project.

Jackie comes in.

JACKIE
What are you doing?

Sue Ellen doesn't answer. She starts to cry but doesn't give up her task. Jackie sits down next to her.

JACKIE
What happened?

More tape. One of the sheets of paper is almost whole.

SUE ELLEN
I'm sorry.

JACKIE
Who did this, Susie?

SUE ELLEN
A boy at school.

Jackie picks up the piece of paper and examines it.

JACKIE
I told you not to get my homework,
Sue Ellen.

Sue Ellen doesn't respond but she stops taping things.

JACKIE
You shouldn't antagonize people.

SUE ELLEN
I just want them to leave me alone!

JACKIE
People don't do that. They don't leave you alone.

Sue Ellen just looks at her. Jackie starts piecing together the papers.

SUE ELLEN
Go away.

JACKIE
I told you not to get my homework.

SUE ELLEN
Mr. Taylor said you needed to learn decorum.

JACKIE
Mr. Taylor is an idiot.

Sue Ellen tries to stop Jackie from taping together the pieces of paper.

SUE ELLEN
Stop it. Leave me alone.

JACKIE
Wanna know what I did to him?

Sue Ellen pauses. Yes, she does.

JACKIE
I slapped him. I slapped him in the face.

Sue Ellen's jaw drops.

SUE ELLEN
What!

JACKIE
Mmhmm. I slapped him.

SUE ELLEN
Why?

Jackie shrugs. Then she looks at Sue Ellen and pulls her to her feet.

JACKIE
It was like this.

Jackie makes Sue Ellen sit on the edge of the bed.

JACKIE
He made me stay after class. And then he came over and he was like,

Jackie is acting this out -- Sue Ellen sits and Jackie leans over her with her hand on her shoulder.

JACKIE
(pretending to be Mr. Taylor)
Do you know why I asked you to stay after?

Sue Ellen shakes her head

JACKIE
And I was like, no? And he said, "I need to report you for a dress code violation. Your shirt is inappropriately transparent."

Jackie shifts her gaze, mocking Mr. Taylor, down to Sue Ellen's chest. Then back up to her eyes, then back to her chest. Then back up. A tilt of the head and eyebrow lift.

JACKIE
So I slapped him.

Jackie takes Sue Ellen's hand and uses it to slap herself in the face. Jackie smiles.

JACKIE
Just like that.

Jackie leaves the game. She returns to the pieces of ripped up homework. Sue Ellen stays sitting on the bed.

JACKIE
Anyway. It was stupid. And now I'm suspended.

She tapes together another piece.

JACKIE
But don't worry, Susie. I'll do my homework. I won't throw away my education.

Jackie looks up at Sue Ellen and smiles. Sue Ellen smiles back. It's like an inside joke.

JACKIE
And you. You just have to not be like me. Don't get mad when people are jerks. Okay? Make 'em like you. Then you'll be alright.

21 EXT. WOODS - MORNING 21 *

Jackie and Sue Ellen gather wild blackberries. Sue Ellen collects them in a big ziploc bag. Jackie eats them.

SUE ELLEN
Stop eating all of them. I need them.

Jackie sticks out her tongue. It's purple.

JACKIE
Look, my tongue is purple. I'm turning into a giraffe.

Sue Ellen sticks out her tongue, too.

JACKIE
I should put some of these in Mr. Taylor's car. Then when he goes to drive it, he'll stain his khakis.

Sue Ellen smiles at this idea.

SUE ELLEN
You could sneak Methylene blue into his food. It's makes you pee blue.

JACKIE
(laughing)
That's a really weird idea, Susie.

Jackie offers a handful of berries to Sue Ellen's bag.

JACKIE
Here.

She drops them in.

22 EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING 22

Hands outstretched. Sue Ellen distributes her blackberries to her classmates.

CLASSMATE CLARA
What are they?

SUE ELLEN
Blackberries.

CLASSMATE CHARLIE
Are they good?

SUE ELLEN
Yeah.

BYRON
Can I have one?

Sue Ellen hands Byron a berry. He eats it.

BYRON
Blegh. This one's sour. Gimme another one.

SUE ELLEN
No, I don't want to waste them.

BYRON
That's not fair!

Sue Ellen glares at him. Then gives him another one.

23 INT. SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY 23

Sue Ellen stares at what were her crystals. Now they're just crushed shards.

She looks at Byron. He looks back at her blankly. He's working on his own crystals.

Then Byron raises his hand.

BYRON
Ms. Hayworth! Sue Ellen brought food to class and she won't share!

MS. HAYWORTH
Sue Ellen, you know that's not allowed. Bring it up here now.

Sue Ellen looks at Ms. Hayworth and back at Byron.

24 EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON 24

Sue Ellen walks home from school.

24A EXT. FIELD - AFTERNOON 24A *

Back across the field. *

25 EXT. NEWLY BUILT NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON 25 *

Back through the woods and past the new houses. *

26 EXT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - DAY 26

Sue Ellen returns from school. Something's different. The car is out front. There's yelling from inside.

Sue Ellen leans against the front door and listens:

JACKIE (O.S.)
Mom, please! It's not my fault!

CHRISTINA (O.S.)
Yes it is! It is your fault. All you gotta do is work hard and keep outta trouble! That's all you have to do!

JACKIE (O.S.)
Stop it! It's not my fault! Mom! This isn't fair!

CHRISTINA (O.S.)
You coulda been somebody! You coulda gotten a real education.

JACKIE (O.S.)
Mom! Shut up! It's not my fault. It's your fault!

CHRISTINA (O.S.)
Don't talk back to me.

JACKIE (O.S.)
Honestly, if I just had nicer clothes, none of this would have happened!

CHRISTINA (O.S.)
Stop it. Stop making excuses. Stop it!

A door slam.

Silence.

Sue Ellen opens the door.

27 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - DAY 27

When Sue Ellen comes in, Christina is standing at the kitchen counter. She turns away, wiping her eyes.

CHRISTINA
Hey baby. How was school.

SUE ELLEN
Why are you home so early?

CHRISTINA
You got homework?

28 INT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - GIRLS' BEDROOM - DAY 28

Sue Ellen comes into the bedroom. Jackie is face down on the bed. She's probably crying.

Sue Ellen comes over and sits on the bed.

Jackie doesn't look at her.

Sue Ellen keeps sitting there.

Jackie doesn't look up when she says:

JACKIE
I lost my scholarship. They took it away because I got suspended.

Sue Ellen lies down next to Jackie, trying to hug her.

JACKIE
It's really not my fault, Susie.

SUE ELLEN
Okay.

JACKIE
Okay?

SUE ELLEN
Yeah.

29 EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING 29

Sue Ellen returns to school. Just like every day.

30 INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY - MORNING 30

Sue Ellen walks through the halls. Other students move quickly to their classes. She pulls off her sweatpants. She switches from sneakers to oxfords.

Byron, on his way into class, stops by:

BYRON
Gimme one of those berries.

SUE ELLEN
I didn't bring any today.

BYRON
What? Why not?

Sue Ellen shrugs.

BYRON
That's stupid. You're useless.

Her attention is pulled away by the sound of a voice down the hall:

MR. TAYLOR (O.S.)
This is unacceptable.

JACKIE (O.S.)
Wait, please!

Sue Ellen moves toward the sound. Byron follows. She can see outside Mr. Taylor's room now. Her sister is there, begging him.

JACKIE
I'm sorry! Please, I'm trying to apologize.

MR. TAYLOR
You need to leave. You are currently suspended from attending this school.

Other students watch or avert their eyes.

JACKIE
Listen to me! I'm apologizing! I'm sorry! Please! Help me fix it.

MR. TAYLOR
This is not the correct way to go about things. You should not be

MR. TAYLOR
here. I'm going to go get principal Higgins.

He walks past her, leaving her alone.

JACKIE
I'm apologizing.

Jackie's back is to Sue Ellen. She takes a moment, then straightens up her posture and walks away.

We stay there with Sue Ellen. She watches her sister. She thinks. She's lost inside her own head. The voices of passersby, real or imagined fill her ears: *

STUDENT IN THE HALLWAY 1 *
Oh my god. Did you see that? *

STUDENT IN THE HALLWAY 2 *
She's insane. *

STUDENT IN THE HALLWAY 3 *
No wonder she dropped out. *

And then there's Byron. He watched it all with Sue Ellen. He steps up, taking over the space next to her. *

She turns sharply to look at him. *

31 INT. SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY 31

In class now, Sue Ellen sits silently next to Byron. She turns to him:

SUE ELLEN
Byron. Hey, Byron.

BYRON
What. Are you talking to me?

SUE ELLEN
If you want, I can show you where the blackberries grow.

BYRON
Okay.

SUE ELLEN
After school?

BYRON
Yeah, okay.

32 EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON 32 *

Sue Ellen and Byron leave together. *

32A EXT. FIELD - AFTERNOON 32A *

They tromp across the field and into the woods. *

32B EXT. WOODS - AFTERNOON 32B *

Sue Ellen leads the way.

Now off the path. *

BYRON
Where are we going?

SUE ELLEN
Come on! It's this way.

He looks back. Sue Ellen keeps forging ahead. He doesn't want to get left behind.

33 EXT. WOODS - DEEPER WOODS - AFTERNOON 33 *

Sue Ellen has found what she was looking for. A bramble of plants with big green leaves and bright purple flowers. Shiny dark purple fruit peek out from under the leaves.

SUE ELLEN
These. These are delicious.

Byron catches up.

SUE ELLEN
These are even better than blackberries.

BYRON
What are they?

Sue Ellen doesn't answer. She starts plucking the ripe berries off the plant.

Byron follows her lead. He gathers a few in his hands. Sue Ellen stands to look at him, her hands already full.

SUE ELLEN
You should try one. Make sure you like them.

He pops one in his mouth and chews. Sue Ellen watches him intently.

He shrugs.

BYRON
It's pretty good.

Then he eats another one and goes back to picking them.

Sue Ellen watches him. She holds a few of the berries in her hands.

SUE ELLEN
I've gotta go home.

She marches back in the direction they came, moving fast, head down.

BYRON
Wait! I wanna bring some with me.

He eats another one and then follows after her, hands full.

She keeps up the pace.

BYRON
Hey, stop walking so fast. I'm gonna drop mine.

34 EXT. NEWLY BUILT NEIGHBORHOOD - AFTERNOON 34 *

They're out of the woods now. Byron is lagging behind. *

Byron coughs.

BYRON
Hey, wait.

Another coughing attack. Sue Ellen turns around. Byron is bright red. He drops his berries.

Sue Ellen turns away, starts to walk faster.

He coughs and hacks. He gasps for air. He tries to say:

BYRON
Hey! Help!

Sue Ellen throws down the belladonna berries she's still holding and starts to run.

She runs and runs and runs.

35 EXT. CARRIWAY HOUSE - AFTERNOON 35

Christina and Jackie are just pulling up in the car. Christina heads into the house, but Jackie moves slower. As she hesitates, she notices Sue Ellen in the distance, running at a sprint.

Jackie watches her run toward home.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Crew

The first person who was officially a part of the project was Huay-Bing Law. He ended up with a Creative Producer credit, which was my way of recognizing that he made the project happen in those early stages. We're longtime collaborators, (or at least, as longtime as you can be in a three year MFA program,) and I trusted his judgment on some of those early drafts. I asked him to produce the film because he's practical, connected, and knowledgeable about the project, and about my strengths and weaknesses. He tried to say no: "I'm afraid I'll let you down." And in the end, our projects ended up being so overlapping in time, people, locations, and effort, that it didn't make sense for him to be particularly hands-on.

One day though, early on, when I was complaining about something or griping about how hard it was to find people who weren't already over-committed, Huay had an invaluable suggestion. "Know who you should ask to help produce? She's not a producer, but you have a good working relationship with her," he said. I honestly didn't know who he was thinking of, and I was surprised when he said "Sarah Hennigan." And that was an amazing idea.

I met with Sarah soon after, and I remember at our first meeting, as she dove right into logistics and crew, having to stop her to ask: "so, is that a yes? Are you onboard?" She was. She's a talented cinematographer, director, and gaffer, and she dove into producing my thesis film as if it were her own. It was amazing and such a relief.

There's a moment early on when you feel so utterly alone in your own project that it feels both impossible and misguided. It feels like a pipe dream, or worse, an egotrip. Then, as people begin to join you, read your script and say "yes, let's do it," you begin to feel as if the project is

inevitable. The joy of it sets in and the impossibility of failure lifts you up instead of weighing you down.

For months, I'd been so insecure in my creative process. I remember talking to my sister on the phone, telling her I wasn't sure I could do it, telling her all I could see was the hustle, none of the joy. And then suddenly I felt the joy of it again. I was filled with buoyancy and drive. It was a feeling that lasted and lasted, and it began with crewing up. (Note to my future self: remember this.)

One of the other people who joined in early on was Rachel Bardin, our director of photography. She is my closest friend, and she shot my pre-thesis film *The Letter E*. There was a moment when I thought maybe I should work with someone new, branch out, but even when I was thinking that I also knew I would probably ask Rachel to shoot this film. I have so much confidence in her eye as well as her attitude. I can trust her when she says the frame is set, and I can trust that she'll treat the members of her team with respect and kindness.

This is something that's important to me: kindness on set. I told Sarah as we were crewing up that attitude was more important than experience, and I said it as I was crewing up for my pre-thesis as well. At our first production meeting, I presented a deck of information about our project: a synopsis, an "artistic vision" and visual strategy, an overview of locations and cast, and a written outline of my "production philosophy."

The production philosophy was this:

> *We choose to value the experience of our creative partners over the impossible goal of a perfect shoot. Flexibility, generosity, and gratitude are valued by all crew members. Department heads and experienced filmmakers commit to teaching and encouraging the less-experienced members of our team.*
> *A production is successful only if everyone is glad to have been a part of it.*

I believe in this strongly, even though I made it up. I made it up from my own experience. I work harder when I'm treated well. I care more about the final result when I care about the people working toward it. I have never done a better job after being yelled at. And when a filmmaker tells me they're doing me a favor by letting me work (for free) on their project, I immediately want to run the other way.

After my pre-thesis film, I worried that I had gotten this wrong. I had prioritized the happiness of the cast and crew over the end product. And the end product is kind of important – not just for its own sake or for mine, but for the worthwhileness of everyone's work. At that stage, right after the shoot and before the film was done, there were people who told me I'd been stupid. The doctrine of the perfectionist auteur is compelling: the mad genius who's an asshole but it's for the sake of the work. In other words, it's fine to be horrible as long as you're brilliant, and maybe if you're horrible that will make you brilliant. I almost believed this. There was a scene in *The Letter E,* my pre-thesis film, that we did not spend enough time on. There's almost no coverage, the one shot we did get is lit weirdly and framed awkwardly, the performances work but are uneven: it's a bit weak. So as I was editing, I cursed myself for rushing it, even though rushing was the right thing to do. (We'd had to re-cast a character the night before we started shooting and were rushing to make her schedule work.)

For a while, I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about the balance between a happy crew and going for perfection. If I'd shot my thesis film immediately after my pre-thesis, I might have done things differently. But in the year that passed between productions, I worked on other sets, I worked with more people, and I got older. I stopped believing in perfection, and I started

realizing that my role as a director is to make the best of it. Especially in this context – a student film with unpaid crew – there is no excuse for blame or meanness. The question of priorities started to seem like a bizarre, false, made-up equivalency. There is no question. People should be treated well. And I should make the best movie I can for all of us.

So I'm going to stick with my production philosophy even though I'm sure people will continue to tell me I'm an idiot. It's not the way of the asshole auteur.

A couple of things happen when you commit to this kind of philosophy. One is that you begin recruiting people who are not necessarily hotshots. The other is that these people begin to create a positive, collaborative environment without being asked. At the very end of our shoot, after eight long hot days of work, we wrapped the equipment in one of the studios, counting clamps and gathering tape, and then, when we were done, no one left. People stayed. Our eight year old actor, up past her bedtime, tried to teach us all to dance. People sang songs. There was hair braiding and freestyle rapping and eventually, a giant game of catch with a ball made out of the collected gaff tape. I was exhausted, but I was also overwhelmed by the camaraderie of it all. None of it had anything to do with me; I hadn't organized it or planned it or tried to get people to stay. And it wasn't that this was a giant group of old friends. The age range was about 20 years (or 30, before the 8 year olds left) and a lot of the people had been strangers two weeks earlier. It was just an amazing group of people who were happy to be there. I am so extremely proud of having a set that led to that.

Sophia Loffreda, our 1st Assistant Director, was a big part of what made the dynamic what it was. She's the kind of AD that speaks quietly and asks patiently. It makes a huge difference. She was also one of the first people I asked to work on this. I'd AD'ed her pre-thesis

film in the winter, and she was still editing and finalizing it when we began production on *Bad Things*. She was busy and getting no sleep and had to deal with one of the most difficult-to-schedule shoots that has ever existed, and she did it all without ever seeming mad or frustrated.

Figure 1: The crew at wrap

Some of the people involved were pretty new to their roles. Vanessa Uhlig, our wardrobe person, had never done wardrobe before. I'd talked to her about her own film though, for which she'd gone deep into production design. It was a surreal film that needed a lot, and Vanessa managed to pull it off. She ordered dresses from all around the world, did intense thrifting, and had a singular vision for what she wanted. I don't think she'd really thought of this as *doing wardrobe*, but when she told me about it, months earlier, I filed it away in my brain, and when I realized how big a job wardrobe would be for *Bad Things*, I thought of Vanessa. She'd never planned on being a wardrobe person and hadn't done it before, but when I asked her she said "yes, absolutely." And then she did an amazing job. She worked with Rachel to do camera tests

of certain fabrics. Rachel had concerns about moiré effects with plaid school uniforms and exposure with white shirts, so there was a lot of back and forth before we landed on our blue jumpers. On set, Vanessa was the kind of person who grabbed shirts off my back and stopped to make things better even when I said "it's probably fine." She was a huge asset.

This is how I feel about everyone who was on set. They surprised and amazed me. Joanna Wu is a good example of that. She was a grip, and she'd never really worked in g&e before. Her first set experience was only a few months back on Rachel Bardin's thesis shoot, for which I was the director of photography. And on the *Bad Things* set, she was ridiculous. At one point, our lead actress's grandmother pulled me aside and said, "you have such an amazing crew. And you know who's really impressive? That girl Joanna." It was true. She worked hard. At the beginning of the shoot, she admitted later, she didn't know what anything was called. That can be a problem for someone in her role, who's always being asked to go grab "a mafer" or "a c-clamp" or "a double" or "some dirt." But she asked questions and learned quickly. One of our shoot days was scheduled on a terrible day. We really tried not to do it, but we had to. It was May 14th – Mother's Day as well as the final graduate student film screening day. We started early and got most of the shoot done before the screenings began, but we weren't quite done when we lost almost our entire crew to the screenings. Everyone had something they'd worked on screening and *had to go!* So we forged on with a skeleton crew, and suddenly, Joanna was our gaffer. She kept things running smoothly, packed everything up carefully, and was the last one there with me putting everything away. Gratitude feels like too small a word for what I felt about that.

This chapter could easily devolve into me raving about how amazing everyone I worked with was, and maybe it should. But that might get boring and the takeaway is that the people who

worked on *Bad Things* were outrageously brilliant. They were kind and thoughtful, and the film would be nothing without them. I am grateful in a way that could probably make me cry if I let it.

There were some challenges, and I should record those as well. The hardest position to fill was production designer. It was a big job and our original shoot dates were right in the middle of the semester when everyone else was also shooting. Everyone I reached out to was already committed. It was only after I'd moved my dates to May and began re-reaching out to people that Arri Caviness leapt on board. She didn't have a ton of time, but met with me and Rachel over and over and managed to pull of some amazing things. I'd also asked Daniel Earney, one of the people in my cohort, and even though he'd never done production design for anyone before and was also shooting his thesis film at the same time, he wanted to help. So the two of them ran at it together and it was all hectic and crazed, but in the end, it was perfect.

We didn't have some of the things we originally wanted. It would have been nice to have a real set photographer throughout, and it would have made things easier to have a committed extras-wrangler. All of the Steadicam operators who were recommended to us weren't available, and we ended up hiring someone who nobody we knew had worked with. He told us he'd flown the Arri Alexa before and that was as much confirmation of his skill that we got in advance. That's no small thing – the Alexa is a giant heavy camera that only the best Steadicams with the best operators can manage. In the end it was fine, but I remember the anxiety of it vividly.

Crewing up is always difficult. It's like creating a company. It's building a team of people who may have never worked together before. You have to trust people and manage them and collaborate and plead. It happens fast, but all the difficulties and responsibilities of hiring in other

contexts are still there. And while I think we ended up with the best crew in that has ever existed, I still feel that in one way I failed. We made an effort to recruit non-white people and women, but we could have done more. All of us have been teachers at this university, and we've all seen the disparity. People say hopeful things about how it used to be worse, but that doesn't really mean much if it's still a problem. Progress only continues to progress if we keep pushing ourselves to care. The majority of our department heads were women, but the majority of them were also white. It's easy, when things move quickly, to get lazy. This is another reminder to my future self.

CHAPTER FIVE
Casting

Casting is 90% of directing. Or 75%. Or is it 99%? Depends who you ask. Everyone agrees, though, that it's important. I sent out a the first casting call on February 24th, 2017. I was casting for nine primary characters at that point. (I still had a best friend for Sue Ellen – Doreen, who got written out soon after the casting call went out.) In the first rounds, though, I was really only looking for Sue Ellen (the 8 year old protagonist,) Jackie (her teenage sister,) and Christina (their mother.) This family dynamic was the most important thing, so I started with it.

The Family

The auditions were long. I started with sides, always with a reader so that I could focus on performance. Then we'd pause and I'd do a brief interview with the actor. It wasn't in character; it wasn't about improv. I just wanted to get to know them better, to understand where they were coming from and see what they were bringing to the role.

For little kids auditioning for the role of Sue Ellen, I asked these questions:

What grade are you in?

What's your teacher like?

Who are you best friends?

Do you go to school with your best friends, or do you have different friends at school?

Who's the coolest kid in your class?

Who's the least popular kid in your class? Is there someone nobody likes?

What's something mean you've done? I won't tell anyone.

What's something mean someone else has done to you?

What do you want to be when you grow up?

What will you do to get to be that when you grow up? Will you go to college? Will you move somewhere? Will you work on some skill? What are you doing now to get to be that?

I learned that some of the kids who came in were popular; some were not. Some were mean; some were nice. Some had already decided they'd be actors forever, and some were still kids, trying out a new hobby. I learned about the social dynamics of 3rd grade classes, and I learned that describing teachers beyond "nice" or "mean" was still difficult at that age.

For the teenagers, it was a similar but shorter list of questions. *Tell me about school. What are you going to be when you grow up? What's something mean you've done?* For the adults, auditioning for the role of Christina, the questions were different:

When you were a little kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Do you have kids?

Do you have siblings?

Do remember any piece of advice that your parents or relatives gave you? Do you believe it?

Then, after these interviews, we ran the scenes again. For most people, the performances got better; people were more relaxed.

I tend to have gut reactions in casting. It's probably a weakness, and I usually don't trust this instinct right away, but usually I end up making the decision my gut originally told me to. The first person I auditioned who I thought "yes, definitely," about was Timeca Seretti. She came

in and blew me away. She took adjustments well, she connected with the reader, and she built the character of Christina with an intensity that I hadn't yet seen. In her interview, we talked about her background and her son. She said she was from Gary, Indiana, I said "like the Music Man," and she said "or like Michael Jackson."

Figure 2: Timeca Seretti as Christina Caraway (film still)

She was not the only great actor we saw, but she stuck in my head. The problem, if you can call it that, was that we had not seen any 8 year olds or teenagers who could believably be cast as her daughters. Timeca is light-skinned African American, and the majority of the kids we'd seen were blond.

We were holding race-blind casting sessions. I'd written the characters as white. The film was very much about class and privilege. In Austin especially, but also the film world in general, it's harder to find roles as a non-white actor, and films are dominated by white faces.

Shortly after first auditioning Timeca, I reached out to Nya Garner. She'd been in films by other UT grad students – Jim Hickcox's *Slow Creep* and Amanda Gotera's *Ronnie Monsters* –

and I'd always wanted to work with her. She's got screen presence and clearly takes acting seriously. Plus, she could believably be Timeca's daughter. I sent her the script.

This all felt slightly backwards though, because if we couldn't find an 8 year old who could carry the film, we'd be stuck. That's a big task. I hadn't auditioned a single mixed-race or African American eight year old at that point. There were some talented kids who came in, so it felt like there were possibilities, but no *yes definitely.*

I started getting more creative with my casting. I asked around, reached out to schools, and started to click through every talent agency in Texas's headshots. That's how I found Calah Lane. I found her through Linda McAlister Talent in Dallas. Clicking through her brief list of credits I found a link to a "personality reel" in which Calah just stood in front of the camera and talked. I thought, *yes definitely.* I sent a message to the agency, asking to be put in touch. I explained that it was a lead role in a UT graduate student film, and also that it was unpaid and I totally understood if that wasn't acceptable. They forwarded my email to Calah's parents. I was so excited when I got an email from Laquilla Lane, Calah's mom.

The first thing was a video audition. They live in Dallas and have three kids, so coming to Austin was a big deal. Calah was thoughtful and careful in her video audition. With child actors, video auditions can be tricky though, because it's always possible an adult is doing some pretty hands-on coaching. I sent it to Sarah, Huay, and Rachel. They didn't say *yes definitely*, but they said, *yes maybe!*

On a Saturday night, we held an audition just for Calah Lane and Nya Garner. Nya had read the script and said she was interested, but her schedule was going to be complicated. I asked her to come in anyway. Huay and Rachel were there for the audition, helping out.

Nya came in first. We ran through a scene and did a brief interview. Then Calah got there and we dove into scenes with the two of them. I knew I wouldn't be able to ask the Lane family to come back to Austin for another audition, so we did a lot that day. After we ran through lines, we played some games and did some improv. I had the two of them race back and forth. By the time we got to improv we were all laughing hysterically. Calah was notably smart – she listened and asked questions – and she was notably energetic. When we tried to interview her she was laughing and falling out of her chair. She was definitely trying to entertain us. She would sometimes sneak a peek at me while she was acting to see if I approved.

Afterwards, I got the advice not to cast her. People told me that she would be too hyper, she'd throw off the set, she'd be handful, etc. But I really really wanted to.

There was another set of people I could have cast. I thought they were all talented and could definitely do it. I just didn't have that gut *yes, definitely* feeling.

So I decided to do a few things: (1) cast Timeca Seretti, Nya Garner and Calah Lane, (2) ask many more people, especially African American people, to read my script, (3) make changes to the script. I admit it made me nervous to cast black actors in this film because the story is so intensely, inherently about privilege, violence, and power. The protagonists are victims and perpetrators of violent acts. This isn't a light story and it isn't one where race could ever be cast as irrelevant. *But.* The idea that race is ever irrelevant is an idea that reeks of privilege. I do not want to be Jeff Nichols calling the story of Loving vs. Virginia "apolitical" and I do not want to Quentin Tarantino saying "black culture is my culture." I am a white woman and my experience of life has been shaped in a thousand ways by that identity. My experience has been different than that of black Americans. That means I need to do the work of research, of deferring to

others, and of asking questions. It doesn't mean that I should only write stories about people who look like me.

Figure 3: Calah Lane and Nya Garner as Sue Ellen and Jackie (film still)

In order to complete this on-screen family, I cast Skeeta Jenkins as Rick, the dad. I never auditioned him. I met him in the hallway outside the studio where I was holding auditions, and he asked if I had any roles for him. He was there shooting another student film, and we exchanged information. At the time, I thought maybe he could play the principal. He's a big, imposing presence. After I'd reached out to him, I also found out he'd been in Huay's pre-thesis film, Sarah had worked with him on something, and he was a well-known, extremely generous and caring actor. He was based in Dallas, too, and once we got to set, it turned out he already knew Calah and her family.

The Bullies

The bullies were hard to cast. Mr. Taylor needed to be friendly and jocular, but also a believable creep. Byron needed to be able to be mean without being one-dimensional.

There are apparently fewer 8 year old boys who are into acting than there are 8 year old girls. Our first few casting calls for Byron only lead to a few auditions, and those weren't entirely promising. Ching Wang had come on board to help with casting, and she left no stone unturned. She visited schools, reached out to acting camps, and emailed people she vaguely remembered from previous auditions.

When Joe Colaleo came in, he was wearing a black polo with the collar popped and made us laugh. We found that a lot of the boys coming in didn't have lines memorized and weren't great at reading, so we'd come up with a few different activities to try. Our reader that day was Matt Grabowski and we'd ask the auditioning Byron to race him. Then we'd tell the kid to try to stop Matt from moving. *Get in his way. Make him stop. Scare him.* Then, sometimes, I'd ask the boy to *be mean.* I'd say things like "make him feel bad," and "insult him." And we'd get a wide range of responses. Meanness came easier to some than to others. We all remembered Joe's response. He had a hard time being mean, just like he had a hard time being serious. He was smiley; he'd laugh; he make jokes. First he'd just say to Matt "you're an idiot." But I kept prodding. *Keep going! What else? Make him feel bad!* That's when Joe went on a magically bizarre rant. He asked why Matt was wearing red, when everyone knew that blue was better. Then he got into what red and blue represent and ended with a spectacular "red is the color of blood and death!"

There were three possible Byron's that came out of Ching's round up. We brought them all back for a second round, where I was determined to see if (a) they could all actually memorize lines, and (b) they could be serious and take acting seriously. All of them had been quiet and unwilling to admit ever being mean in our little interviews. I was worried about that

because it meant I didn't know how to talk to them about the characters, and I didn't have any reference points for guiding performance. Ching was the genius who told me that I needed to talk to them about myself for them to talk to me about their own lives.

I spent almost an hour with each of the possible Byrons. We sat outside with Ching and one of her students who was helping that day. We ran through the scene, then the potential Byron and I went over to a quiet corner of the courtyard and talked. I told them that we needed to talk so that we could have shortcuts for talking about this Byron character. I told them about someone who'd been mean to me at a summer internship: one of the other interns in my intern group. We were supposed to work together on a project that we'd present to the big shots at the company, and we had an advisor who was a higher up in the marketing department. This other intern, though, would try to sabotage our group. She'd refuse to work with us and then present her work to our advisor, taking us all by surprise. "She was mean and tried to make us look bad," I told the Byrons. "She made me so mad. If there were a way for me to get back at her, I probably would have done it." Then they'd tell me about times they got super mad, or felt like something was unfair or had wanted revenge and not gotten it. They were interesting conversations.

With Joe Colaleo, who was, it turned out, entirely aware of his own inability to keep a straight face, we talked about a few different memories and assigned those feelings nicknames. "Pajama serious" or "staring contest" or "chair throwing." These things were kind of miraculous. If he had one of these memories to focus on, he didn't laugh or joke or smile. He was entirely focused on the situation. He still had a hard time memorizing the lines. He knew them, but he'd lose confidence and want to check. When he made it through the scene without forgetting a line, he'd celebrate. The other callbacks went well, too, but in the end, Joe's version of Byron just

made the most sense for the movie. He played it confident without being evil. He was mean, but completely recognizable.

Figure 4: Joe Colaleo as Byron Murphy (film still)

The older bully, Mr. Taylor, was easier to cast in a lot of ways, but we definitely lucked into Darrell Mitchell. There were quite a few people I thought could play the role. There was no *yes, definitely*; it was all about how the actor would change the interpretation of the story. There were movie-star handsome actors in their early twenties, who would have made the Jackie-Mr.Taylor dynamic almost that of peers. There was a hyper-intense actor who made Mr. Taylor purely scary. Darrell came in to audition because he'd been down the hall auditioning for Huay-Bing Law's thesis film and wandered over to see what we were casting. He took a few minutes to read over the script, and then we had him read with Ching as Jackie. We tried a whole bunch of different things and then we did some improv. He was obviously a talented actor with a lot of training. He asked questions and did his own scene analysis on the fly. But the thing that he brought to the role that I hadn't seen before was a sense of confidence or sureness, a sense that he was *right*.

Ms. Hayworth, Mrs. Murphy, and Principal Higgins

We had a lot of people audition for the role of Ms. Hayworth. She's a secondary character, but she also sets up the tone of the school. She's the representative of why Sue Ellen cares about her place at that school. In the auditions we ran through a brief scene and then asked actors to "teach us something." We sat down and asked the actors to teach us anything, teach us something they knew better than us. We had a voice lesson, a lesson about planets, and Nguyen Stanton gave a lesson on how to pronounce her name. Her audition was fun. She was willing to go big in any direction – punish the students, dote on them, get them on track, slap some sense into them.

Lindsey Van de Kirk, who we cast to play Principal Higgins, actually came in to audition for Ms. Hayworth. She imbued the role with a kind of strict authority, and I immediately wanted to cast her as the principal. Similarly, Christia Madacsi, who played Mrs. Murphy (Byron's mom), hadn't auditioned for that role. She'd auditioned for Christina, and she'd really impressed me with her focus and care. She was someone I thought could play Christina, but if she had played Christina, the movie would have been entirely different.

Extras

Going into it, we all knew that filling up a school with kids would be hard. Wardrobe, directing, catering: it would all be more difficult. But even before that, just the challenge of finding that many child actors was already daunting. Luckily, we had Ching Wang. She once again saved the day. She reached out to schools, camps, parents and whoever she could think of, and she assembled a group that was professional, reliable, and fun to work with.

CHAPTER SIX

The Look

Rachel Bardin, our director of photography, and I had worked together before. I shot her thesis project – a web series based on a puppet show about nature and animals – and she'd shot my pre-thesis. When we began talking about the look for *Bad Things*, Rachel said she wanted to do something different.

What she wanted in this project was polish and beauty. She wanted us to slow down the process enough to build lighting schemes that would give our characters a glowing sense of awesomeness. (And I mean "awesomeness" in the least "cool dude" sort of way. These characters would be worthy of awe.)

My primary goals were to maintain a sense of Sue Ellen's subjectivity, give the woods a sense of magic and demonstrate the wide range of relationships visually. We began with references to a few movies about childhood (like *An Angel at My Table* (Jane Campion, 1990)) and a general desire to emulate the soft light and deep contrast of some of Lubezki's cinematography. But my first step toward coming up with a look had been to look through collections of art photography. So I presented Rachel with a series of images, a few of which I've included below.

Figure 5: Samantha, from Suburban Dreams *by Beth Yarnelle Edwards*

Figure 6: Tree Climbing, *2011* by Emer Gillespie

Figure 7: Photograph by Patrick Taberna

We began talking about color fairly early. It affected everyone's work – production design, wardrobe, cinematography and gaffing. The scheme we ended up with gold, teal, and maroon. Gold became important for lighting – we often set white balance to 4300k and let things go warm, sunny. Teal was our accent for light and production design. Maroon was important as a secondary color for our mostly-blue wardrobe.

The wardrobe actually changed because of concerns Rachel had about the look. In our first rendition of the school uniforms, they were dark with white shirts. Contrast became an issue – Rachel pointed out we'd start to blow out shoulders and would have to give in to hotspots with

the white shirts. And the pattern on the jumpers and skirts might lead to moiré. We went back and forth and back and forth, until Vanessa (wardrobe) and Rachel agreed on our final look.

Figure 8: First wardrobe look (left) vs. final look (right)

Rachel delved deep into research for this project. By the time we were about to shoot, she had a powerpoint with every location, possible lighting setups and references from existing movies. The movie she brought to me that ended up being one of our primary references was *Girlhood* (Céline Sciamma, 2014). She pointed out their use of two-shots for the sisters, the not-always-motivated lighting, and the use of color to break up space.

Below, I'm going to include a few of the frames she selected and some of the notes she made about them.

Figure 9: film still reference, Crooklyn*, 1994 dir. Spike Lee, dp Arthur Jafa*

Figure 10: film still reference, Girlhood*, 2014 dir. Céline Sciamma, dp Crystel Fournier*

Rachel's note: "Large soft sources. If the background has harder light, the focus is shallow enough to not tell. But if a wide shot establishes harsh shadows or the time of day, never over soften the light in closeups! Remain naturalistic."

Figure 11: film stills from Girlhood*, 2014 dir. Céline Sciamma, dp Crystel Fournier*

Rachel's note: "Practical light sources in the frame - but also unseen sources. Less strict adherence to reality, established sources. Colors: teal purple, pink."

Figure 12: film still reference, Moonlight*, 2016 dir. Barry Jenkins, dp James Laxton*

Rachel's note: "Car interiors, warm sunlight, color of car interior motivates color contrast."

*Figure 13: film still reference, 4*00 Blows*, 1959 dir François Truffaut, dp Henri Decaë*

Figure 14: film still reference, Burn After Reading*, 2008 dir Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, dp Emmanuel Lubezki*

After all the research and references and watching clips together, we ended up with a general sense of a *look*. The first thing to be established was that we would use handheld as minimally as possible. We'd use it for a couple of key moments, but otherwise, we'd primarily be on a tripod or dolly, and in the scenes in the woods, we'd use steadicam to give it the dreamlike feeling we both wanted. We decided that we'd try to mix hard and soft light sources when we were lighting through windows. (Rachel has a general distaste for the soft-light-through-window look.) We decided to warm things up. We decided to always light Calah, our lead, to carefully separate her from the rest of the world. (Really, this meant we almost always gave her a rim light.) We decided to look for ways to bounce light off of wooden tables in order to create a golden glow that's motivated. And we decided to stay at Calah's eye level as much as possible.

That's how we built the look of *Bad Things*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Acting and Directing

Between directing my pre-thesis film and my thesis film, I had a revelation about acting that now strikes me as absurdly obvious. It was in the Acting for Filmmakers course in the department of Radio-Television-Film: a class that terrified and impressed me.

The revelation was simply that acting is enjoyable. It's a high. It's a fun, addicting, fascinating, bizarre activity. It's the exercise of a muscle we have no opportunity to flex in real life: *the feelings muscle*. Whatever that is.

I registered for the class because that's the advice you get as a new director: you have to take an acting class. A local filmmaker, visiting one of our classes a few months earlier, had spoken of his experience in an acting class like it was a trial by fire. He sweat through his clothes, trembled when eyes were directed at him, choked on lines and dreaded the class. But he stuck it out. And he assured us that it was worth it. At the time, what I understood was that he gained empathy for his actors; he knew, bodily, how hard what he was asking for would be.

And that's what I expected: pain, sweat, and sympathy. Instead, I got pain, sweat, sympathy and jealousy. Actors are lucky. They get to act.

The joy of it is similar to reading a really great novel that creates a character and a situation that feels entirely real as you read it. It's not your life but you go through the emotions with the character, you feel what they feel. It's being able to stretch to emotional extremes without consequence.

When I was in the acting class, I worked on a couple of different scenes. Both were high stakes, emotionally. They were about big fights and possible endings. One was between sisters

(from the movie *Georgia*) and the other was between spouses (from *Hannah and Her Sisters*). They both required *work*. It's not an easy task to get yourself to an emotional state. So we experimented with different essential actions, different tactics, different preparations. Sometimes I'd be running laps before we began, sometimes I'd be quietly sitting, remembering what it felt like to be shoved around on a crowded subway.

This class was still ongoing as I began rehearsals for *Bad Things* and I brought everything I was trying in learning to act into my conversations with my actors. Some of them were well trained and knew how to do that work for themselves; some of them were children who'd never acted before.

In this chapter, I'm going to describe a few of the things I did to try to help the actors arrive at the emotional extremes, to achieve the fun, the intensity of acting. Now that I understand why people act, I think I actually understand my role as a director.

Christina and Jackie's Battles

There are a couple of times in the script that Christina yells at her daughter Jackie. There's an intensity to their relationship that we had to try to find in rehearsals, especially because in the film we jump into these moments mid-stream. Sue Ellen stumbles across these moments without fully understanding, and we are there to witness only the moments she sees.

We had one full rehearsal with the two of them together, and we focused on figuring out how to get the emotional stakes right. We ran through it sitting down, letting them just face each other and make eye contact. We tried it standing. We tried it with blocking that made Christina the warden as Jackie tried to get past her. We tried it where Christina was disowning Jackie, and

we tried it with her trying to get her back on track. There were versions where Jackie was pleading and versions where she was shutting her mother out. We tried different kinds of preparations. First, the two of them both ran laps before we jumped into it, and they came into in with raised heart rates. Then we tried having Nya (Jackie) run laps and Timeca (Christina) would sit and stew and wait for her daughter to arrive.

Then on set, we had to do something else. Immediately after one of their bigger fights, each of them has a moment with Sue Ellen. She comes home from school and asks her mom why she's home so early. She goes in to see that her sister is upset and tries to comfort her. These two moments had to happen *right after that intensity we'd practiced*. But on the shoot days, we had to jump into these post-fight moments. When we shot Jackie's scene, Christina wasn't there, and when we shot Christina's scene, Jackie wasn't there, so we couldn't run through their fight first. Instead, I used a bastardization of a theater exercise.

I'd learned about this in a theater directing class that I wasn't actually in. I was one of the actors in a friend's directing exercise, and the teacher of the class had a lot of ideas about how to make the scene better. It was a scene with five or six characters and at least that many arguments happening all at once. The climax of the scene involved one of the characters screaming and turning to each of the other people in turn, telling them they should be ashamed of themselves. The class's professor said this had to be big, physical, guttural, and she had an idea about how to get there. We'd all put our hands up, palms out, and as this actor turned to each of us, she'd look us in the eye and press her hands against ours. As she said her lines, she would shove as hard as she could and we would shove back. We tried this, and then the professor said, "now do it again but don't touch," and the intensity was still there. While it wasn't the point, what I took away

from this was the intensity and physicality that shoving each other in this controlled, palm to palm way created. So that's what I took, kept, and used on set.

The first time I tried it was with Nya Garner (Jackie) before the scene where she tells her little sister that she lost her scholarship. She needed to feel pretty terrible going into that scene, and I didn't want to leave her to try to find that on her own. In retrospect, I should have warned the crew I was about to do what I did. Nya and I went down the hall, stood palm to palm, locked eyes and shoved each other as hard as we could as we yelled. We used lines from one of the scenes between her and her mother. *This is all your fault. All you had to do was stay outta trouble. It's not my fault! Who's fault is it then? It is your fault. How could you be so stupid. Stop it! It's not my fault.* Then with one final shove, I walked away, and Nya walked back onto set. Then we rolled camera.

I did this with Timeca Seretti (Christina), too. When Sue Ellen gets home from school, Christina needs to be heartbroken and angry. So we stood to the side, pushed each other and yelled. We did it before every take. It allowed her to start with the adrenaline of the fight and try to rid herself of it when she sees her younger daughter. I'd leave her with one final shove and walk away. The camera was already rolling, and she could start when she was ready. She'd always glare at me one last time before the scene began.

Kids Will Be Kids

Calah Lane (Sue Ellen) and Joe Colaleo (Byron) are great. They're hard working, smart, and talented. I really don't think you can watch the final film without some level of awe for Calah's performance. She's really remarkable. She'd also just turned eight when we began

rehearsals. They're young kids – Joe had never acted in anything other than school plays, and Calah had never played a lead. The expectations for actors at that age are (and should be) different.

I think the role of the director is always to give the actors what they need to do well. Usually, this means giving helpful adjustments, providing emotional preparation exercises, or just being the eyes watching so the actor doesn't have to watch him/herself. Really, all of this is just to get the actor out of their own head and into the moment of the scene. If they have what they need to be in the moment, they'll really be able to act. And that's what's *not* different when working with children. Everyone needs help getting into the moment. But the tactics for working with kids can be very different.

Trust is the most important thing. It's easy to rely on the training children get about respecting teachers and grownups and authority, but that's shaky footing, in my opinion. By the time I was 8, I was suspicious of authority and questioned whether or not grownups knew better than I did. In some ways, adults are less skeptical because they have more ways of testing your abilities. They can read the script and decide if they like it. They've had more experience with acting so they can tell if you know what you're talking about. Or they can test you like Marlon Brando would do. He'd do what he thought was a bad performance, and if the director thought it was good, he'd give up on them, never respect them, and probably perform poorly the whole time. (This is all according to Sydney Lumet in his book *Making Movies*.) All this to say, though, that adults decide to trust based on their assessment of your professionalism and skill. Kids could not care less about that.

Kids trust you if you respect them. Yes, you need to know what you're talking about – they're maybe even better at sensing bullshit than adults – but you also have to talk to them and listen, tell them about yourself, explain what you're doing and why things are important.

I had a rehearsal with Joe that was really all about talking through the script and getting to know each other. We went to the park and practiced his coughing fit, we talked about people who were mean and what we thought about his character. When we had our first rehearsal with Joe and Calah together, we talked more about the movie and played games and were silly together. We also talked about what it would be like on set. I told them about steadicams and about the rest of the crew and about how many people would be there. And I think one of the most important things was coming up with our code word. The three of us agreed that we would have some free time or silly time or run around like crazy people time, and if one of us needed the others to be serious, we could say "code blue." I think it was Joe that came up with that word. Obviously, that was a useful tool for me on set, but it wasn't just me that used it. Calah and Joe each called for a code blue at least once when things were getting too crazy.

Because that's the other thing. I do not think it would be helpful to make them stay serious and calm, quietly listening throughout the shoot. They're kids. They like to be silly and make people laugh. So, just like it's my job to yell at Nya or give the actor who plays Mr. Taylor papers to grade, it's my job to give the actors what they need. And child actors need room to be kids.

I'd give piggyback rides to each of them, carry Calah "like a princess" and race when we needed to get places. It's fun. Plus, if they're having fun, they want to be there, and if we're having fun together, they'll listen to me.

Just like adults, though, they needed tools and tactics to work with. Maybe even more than with adults, they need something to focus on. With Joe, this was often referring to one of the "short cuts" I mentioned in the chapter about casting. Pretending he was in a staring contest gave him a kind of mission that kept him intensely focused on the scene and on his scene partner. A memory of throwing a chair in kindergarten gave him a sense of frustration, anger, and ineptitude that made him lash out. For Calah, she needed something to react to. The entire movie is her watching and listening to the people around her. It would have been very easy to just say, okay look serious, and we'll roll a few seconds. But if we talked through the lines of the character opposite her, if we gave her context and then had the scene play out in front of her, she could focus on what she was seeing, and her face would reveal her thoughts and fears.

The most challenging part for Calah was in the final act of the film. Calah's primary mode is cheerful and headstrong, and the way she walks and runs reflects that. She bops up and down; she's a classic example of "a spring in your step." But the end of the movie calls for her to move quickly out of the woods, walking, then running with a kind of fear and desperation. We tried this in rehearsals, but she can't help feeling the glee of movement. She loves to dance, and the way she moves reflects that. So we started trying to take that joy out of it. What we ended up with was her tensing up all of her muscles, especially her arms and back, and practicing the restriction that created. That, combined with focusing on trying to get away from Joe as he walked behind her, gave her enough to focus on to avoid bursting into a wide smile.

The Nice-Guy Bad Guy

In the last chapter, I talked about casting for Mr. Taylor – every actor created a different version of him, and every version of him changed the story entirely.

When I cast Darrell Mitchell, I was already making a decision about who Mr. Taylor was going to be, but I was lucky enough to also get a very well trained, professional actor in the mix. Darrell brought with him a wide range of possibilities for the character. The challenge, was to create a character who is essentially a villain in the story who is seen (and sees himself) as a good guy.

Darrell was full of questions as he prepared for our rehearsals, and one of the big ones was "is he a creep? Did Mr. Taylor do something to Jackie?" And the decision I made was to say no. The fictional circumstances I gave Darrell were very different from the ones I gave Nya. I told him that he hadn't done anything wrong. That he was the teacher everyone liked and he saw one of his students getting off track and tried to help. Then she slapped him, and that's just not acceptable behavior. This backstory allowed him the freedom to use the confidence I saw in him when he auditioned. He could *know* that everyone liked him, that everyone was *supposed to like him*. And that would give him room to be sure about his judgment of Sue Ellen and Jackie.

It also gave me room to give him directions like "win her over" and "defend yourself," which, in the end, I think created the villain of this story.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Production, or When Things Go Wrong

There's a lecture I give to the introductory film production class (RTF 318) every semester that takes my pre-thesis film as a case study. In it, I go through the stages of production: pre-production, production, post-production, and marketing/distribution. I define these stages as "plan for every possible thing", "things go wrong", "making up for the things that went wrong", and "what the heck now."

So let's talk about production, or *when things go wrong*. This wasn't an easy shoot to produce, and pre-production was stressful and impossible and fun in the way it always is. Scheduling was a challenge. Our actors had very specific conflicts and puzzling it all together took time, and Sophia Loffreda, our brilliant 1st AD. But by the time we began, things seemed possible.

The first thing that went wrong was our house location. We'd found it on AirBNB, contacted the owner, talked through what we were going to do, and when she seemed excited and open to it, we booked her home and moved forward with our plans. She'd originally offered to go out of town for the weekend in order to not be in our way. The house was pretty perfect – not only did it have two single beds in the bedroom, they were also red, which fit into the already agreed upon color scheme of red, gold and teal. The yard was full of wildflowers and the house was from the right era of Austin's development. The owner, an older woman who'd re-done a lot of the house herself, seemed enthusiastic about hosting us and knowledgeable about what a film shoot entailed. We talked through everything with her in advance, and thought we'd really lucked out.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to go out of town for the duration of our shoot and decided she was not actually particularly fond of having a film crew in her house. She was grumpy and angry and would yell at crew and cast members. She didn't want us to come into the house until after she woke up, which wasn't until 11am or noon. She didn't want us to touch her furniture and was worried we'd break the door because we used it too much. There was a general fear that she would kick us out before we'd finished shooting. She rescinded her offer to let us use the kitchen to heat up food, which left Ahsjah Exume, who was catering, in the lurch. It was a bad situation. We paid her double the money we'd agreed on and Sarah Hennigan had to delegate other duties in order to spend most of her time on set assuaging our host's concerns.

For this and other reasons, those first few days moved slow. We fell behind, which meant bigger problems. Coverage got thrown out, which we'd already known might happen. We'd already discussed covering a lot of the sisters' scenes in two-shots, letting their dynamic show instead of building it through singles, but that's a risky proposition. You can't build a performance from multiple takes if you don't have things to cut to. I'd be stuck with a single version, so we had to get it right. The onus was on me as a director, which was terrifying and nerve wracking and meant more takes than usual.

The bigger issue that came up was that we couldn't shoot one of our scenes. In the script there's a small moment in the car with the whole family together before the story begins. It's a happy note, a story beat that tells the audience that this is a functional, kind family. It was a simple moment but a complicated thing to shoot, and because of people's schedules, we *had to* get it on one of our shoot days at the house. It just wasn't doable. So we cut it. We thought we'd be able to fit it in later, make it up somehow, but that never happened. We wrapped the shoot

with me saying, *I guess we'll have to do a pickup shoot day later*. That ended up not being possible either, and I had to find a workaround in the edit. The workaround *works* though. And that's the magic of filmmaking: failures are the mother of creativity.

The failure that had no silver lining though, was that everyone on our set got chiggers. We filmed in a wooded area in Pflugerville that was the opposite of remote. It had a paved path through it and was in the middle of a new development of large, identical houses. The path into the woods began next to a swimming pool. And yet, chiggers. The microscopic little bugs bit our child actors and our crew and after two days, we all knew it. The kids were miserable, scratching and scratching. Most of the crew had bites around their ankles, but the kids were kids, and they'd somehow gotten bites all over their bodies. We knew there was poison ivy and we knew there would be bugs, so we had special safety talks about staying on the path and wearing bug spray. And yet. Chiggers. The only lesson to be learned from this, I think, is that no matter how prepared you are, there might still be chiggers.

The bites showed themselves on the last day of our shoot, which also turned out to be the hardest day, fraught with unexpected problems.

It was our eighth day of shooting. We'd split the shoot into four days and four days in order to accommodate Calah's school schedule and maximize our weekend time. We'd spent the second weekend getting scenes that took place in the classroom, the woods, and the school hallways. The day in the woods had been hot and exhausting, the classroom day was overflowing with extras, their parents, and stress, and this last day was supposed to be fairly easy. It was all one location: the hallways of the old pharmacy school building on campus. It was just two scenes with two speaking roles. The first scene was Byron ripping up Sue Ellen's papers; the second

was Byron threatening Sue Ellen with the idea that all scholarship kids eventually drop out. The biggest challenge, I thought, was that we had a ton of extras who would need to be carefully directed.

Then, a little more than an hour before call time, I got an email from the building manager. Things had changed. We couldn't get into the location until 6pm. We had to wrap by 8:30pm. So, we could shoot one of the scenes in the hallway, but we'd need a new location for the other.

My first thought was that it could happen on the steps outside the school – a location we'd already been given permission to use and established as a part of the world of the film. Our school exterior was actually Littlefield Dorm, which is a part of the Honors Quad at the university. It seemed like an easy solution, so I ran over to the building to double check. It was an hour to call time when I found out it was moving day. Cars lined the quad and people lugging all of their belongings were streaming steadily out of what was supposed to be our school exterior. *Littlefield is a no-go*, I texted Sophia, Sarah and Rachel. We'd emailed the cast and crew to change the location of our first meal to a studio in our building, hoping that by the time they all arrived we'd have somewhere convenient to shoot.

I emailed one of the administrators of the Classics department who'd helped me when I'd asked about shooting in their building. *Can we shoot there right this second?* Rachel started scoping out stairwells in our own department's building, since access at least, would be easy. I ran over to Anna Hiss Gym*,* a building on campus that had been my first choice as a location but I'd been strictly forbidden from shooting there. The exterior, though, might match. But the

building is right next to some kind of water filtration building and the constant, loud, whoosh of water through pipes would make audio unusable.

Finally, I went to Bert Herigstad. He's the office manager for our department, but he'd also been my daily ally and advisor in the weeks I'd spent finding on-campus locations for our shoot. I told him the situation and he told me what to do. The six-pack. Six of the oldest buildings on campus are arranged along the south mall, right next to the tower but far enough from the busy traffic of MLK and Guadalupe. They have courtyards and connecting hallways, and beautiful exteriors. Bert gave me a piece of paper that said I was allowed to film on campus, made sure I had his phone number, and told me to head over there and use whatever exterior looked right.

The crew had already assembled and breakfast had already been served. There wasn't time for me to go ahead and scope out the six pack in advance, so I went to the crew, ate some food, and gave the little speech I gave before every difficult day of shooting.

Before most shoot days, I would make everyone pause and gather round. Sometimes it happened later – on our first day I made this happen right before we were about to get our first shot – but it always felt important to me to take this moment. We'd all introduce ourselves and say what we were doing on set that day, I'd have an opportunity to express gratitude, and I'd include a reminder. My reminder was to be kind. I start out by letting everyone know what's going on that day: what's on the docket, what to expect, what's going to be difficult. On many days, that included that we had more to do than was possible, that we'd have to move fast and work hard. But my main point would be that *never in the history of filmmaking has impatience or rudeness made things move more quickly or made people work harder.* It's my "we're in this

together" speech. It's my "we can do this" speech. And it's my assertion of the production philosophy I presented at our first production meeting.

Weeks later, after our shoot had wrapped, one of the crew members brought these little speeches up. She said they'd surprised her, and she asked "if that was true." I'd definitively asserted that *impatience and rudeness had NEVER worked*, and she wondered what my evidence was. I was kind of taken aback. I admitted I made it up. It may very well not be true. But I have never in my life ever worked harder after being yelled at. And even if there were a person for whom this wasn't true, who worked harder and did better with harsh words in her ear, (which I doubt,) I still wouldn't want to be responsible for the creation of that kind of animosity. So, I told this person, I don't care if it's true. I mean it anyway.

That day, as I gave this speech to the crew, I tried to fake confidence in leading them to an unknown location, but it had been a long shoot and I was starting to fade. The camera team and I headed out first. We walked across campus with the camera and a heavy, hard-to-steer cart. We were sweating by the time we made it to the six pack, and I was texting Sophia, Sarah, and Vanessa, trying to coordinate where they should bring food, parents, extras, and cast. Honestly, I was nauseous with stress. But then Rachel and I came to a building with a courtyard and beautiful light, turned to each other, and immediately agreed it was perfect. This is where we would shoot the scene. There was a door that lead to a bench that could be where Sue Ellen would stop to put on her sweatpants before she walked home. There were hallways that created a sense of visual depth and light that bounced into the shadows from the building on the other side. It was architecturally similar enough to the other exterior we'd used. It was beautiful. Rachel even preferred it to our original location.

That day didn't get easier though. When we did make it into our hallway location for the second scene of the day, we discovered a problem we really did not expect at all. We had planned on doing a long dolly shot for this scene, and we'd scoped out the hallway in advance and decided it would be best *not* to use dolly track in that location. The floors were extremely smooth linoleum, and I had a lot of misgivings about asking kids to walk on dolly tracks anyway. We thought we were being smart. Who knew the dolly's wheels would make a loud screeching squeal as the rolled along the linoleum.

The scene was already one of our most difficult. Joe had always had a hard time with his lines in this scene. I rehearsed the kids quickly as the crew moved equipment, and then I had to jump into coordinating extras. Working with extras was a new challenge for me on this set, and while I'd gotten better at it by this last day, my technique for doing it was still personal and time consuming. I'd split the actors into logical groupings. *You two are friends? Great! So you'll be at this locker packing up for the day, and you'll be heading down the hall to catch up with her and let her in on something you heard in the last period.* Next group. *You're all coming out of the same class. You had a test and it sucked, so you wanna get home quick. Don't talk to each other, just get out of here.* Next group. *Second graders. Hurry! This is the high school hallway, so you gotta get out of here and get back to your classroom.* Anyway, it takes a while.

The scene took a long time to set up and coordinate, but finally we were ready to go. *Wait! We can see ourselves in the reflection. Where's Arri?* A production design fix for our reflections: stars decorating the windows. *We can still see Rachel and Camera.* Let's drape black fabric over them. Okay, ready to go. *Roll sound*. *Roll camera. Action*. An extra takes his bag out of his locker, swings it onto his shoulder and leaves for the day. Here's Calah coming in through

the doors. The dolly begins to move. Joe catches up with her. “Where you going?” Then, SQUEEEEESQUEEEESQUEEEE. I wasn’t sure what it was at first. I didn’t call cut. We finished a take. *What was that sound?* The dolly wheels.

The first thing we tried was Lemon Pledge. It’s what you use for squeaky wheels on dolly tracks, so we thought it might work. It didn’t. It actually made things worse. It made the floor slippery and the squeal worse. *Safety announcement: NO RUNNING*. People said we needed baby powder – that would do the trick. *Who has baby powder? Hair and makeup? No. Any of the extras’ parents? Nope.* Someone left to go find baby powder. We kept running takes and deciding they weren’t usable. We got rid of the dolly and brought in the cart we’d used for some of the exterior running shots. Rachel sat down on it with the camera propped up on a cinesaddle and we ran a take. *That’s not going to work*. It was hard to control, not the look Rachel wanted, *and* it still made noises.

Finally, someone had the idea to wrap the tires of the dolly in gaff tape. It would at least be a different texture. It was easier said than done, but we tried it. And it worked! There was a momentary celebration that soon gave way to the realization we were almost out of time. We had to cut coverage. We’d planned on doing dolly shot singles as well as a two shot, but (a) we didn’t have time and (b) the kids never walked at the same pace, so it was unlikely the shots would cut together well anyway. So. We had to get a perfect two-shot take.

Unfortunately, Joe’s lines in this scene were extremely hard to memorize. There were slight repetitions and long diatribes. Joe’s great at memorization, but this was *hard*. There were also more extras than usual, it was our last day, and it was getting later and later in the evening. The beginning of the scene was easier – Byron saunters along and gently mocks Sue Ellen – but

then there would be a turn and things would start to sour. As Byron was supposed to get meaner, Joe would start anticipating the lines he knew he couldn't remember, and he'd pause, panic, and try his best not to laugh. I thought about changing the lines, rewriting to make them easier, but he said that would be harder for him, and I saw that it was true. We'd take little breaks; Joe and Calah and I would go into a back room and run through the lines over and over. *We've got this*. Finally, we made it all the way though! Another momentary celebration. *We just need one more for safety*. And it started over, the stress, the anticipation of stress, the tangled words.

This was probably my weakest point as a director. I wasn't sure how to give Joe what he needed, and I wasn't sure how to fix the problem of needing it to happen in a single take. I needed the rest of the crew to help. And they did. Rachel came up with a second shot we could use. If we moved over to see them in profile, we could watch as Byron swings around Sue Ellen to face her. Then we could push forward in order avoid crossing the line to get that final moment between them. This let us begin halfway through the scene – Joe wouldn't have to remember the whole thing and resetting wouldn't mean getting all of the extras back to their marks. We could do this with no extras and lower stakes. So we did. It was easy, and simple. And in the final edit, I didn't use it. We used the first single usable take. It was perfect, but I couldn't see that at the time.

Then, that was it! *That's a wrap!* We clapped and laughed and all the extras took photos together and with me. *We did it!* And maybe our sense of relief and accomplishment was enhanced by that day of setbacks. Or maybe I'm just straining to see the silver lining.

CHAPTER NINE

After Production

I left production with a kind of pride I should probably call gratitude. It's an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and humility: *I can't believe all of those people worked so hard on that project that was once only a figment of my imagination*.

Someone asked me recently why I like making movies and not writing novels. Not having to convene large groups of people or use expensive equipment does sound appealing. But the terrifying thing about sitting alone creating a world, is that it's just you. And *you* are just one brain. For Mr. Taylor's classroom, Arri Caviness (production designer) and I talked about what books and what toys should be on the teacher's desk. She and Rachel talked about what kind of lamp would work best. And then there was a brief mention of needing to write things on the chalkboards.

The chalkboards, though, weren't something I thought much about. To Arri and Daniel Earney, her second in command, they were (literally) a blank slate ready to be filled. Daniel spent hours researching what should be written on them. In the script it specifies what book would be there – *The Age of Innocence* – so he took that and ran. He read Sparknotes analyses and guides to teaching the book, and, even though he wasn't actually able to be on set that day, came up with a giant list of very specific notes to be written on the board. Then that day, Arri carefully wrote relevant themes, structure analyses, graphs and arrows and bullet points on the chalkboard.

My point is that the collaboration of filmmaking isn't just about working together to complete a task. It's also about each person caring about and thinking about something different.

When people write novels, it's just them and their one brain focusing on the details that their brain thinks are important. There is, I'm sure, a kind of magic in that. But for me, there is no comparison to the high that comes out of this brain-melding magic of collaboration.

So that's where I was after we wrapped: marinating in this sense of appreciation and wonder. The next step was a scary one.

After the intense collaboration of production, the solitude of the edit can be kind of a shock to the system. I edit my own work, which I often think is a mistake in other people's work. It's hard to find objectivity and distance from material you just weeks earlier directed. But I really like editing. That's the only explanation for my hypocrisy. I really like editing. I enjoy it almost as much as I enjoy directing, which is saying something.

The first thing I did was bring all of the footage into Avid MediaComposer. This was only a week after we'd wrapped. I was determined to have a few scenes edited to submit with my Austin Film Society grant application, which was due in June. It was a perfect motivator.

I organized the footage by scene and synced the video and audio together. This task, usually a grindingly slow process, was quickly accomplished. Rodd Simonsen, our sound recordist and one of the most helpful people I know, had rigged a method of doing timecode sync, which made the syncing process relatively painless.

Then I started in, scene by scene. For shorter pieces, I'll usually start at the beginning and work straight through – this way I can feel how the transitions work and feel the structure as it flows. But for this project, the longest I've taken on so far, I had to do things differently. I knew I wouldn't be able to feel my way through the entire film, because it would take too long to get there. So I began scene by scene, not always in chronological order. I'd create a sequence, pull

selects, and then start roughing out a cut of the scene in its own sequence. Then I'd create a fine cut of the scene. Sometimes I'd have multiple versions. I worked and worked on each distinct scene, trying to feel out the structure of it on its own before it became a part of the whole.

This was, really, the longest phase of my editing process. I chose not to combine them into a complete story until I felt somewhat confident in them each separately.

Then, finally, I did combine them. And what I got was a bloated, too long film that needed to be cut down. But it wasn't exactly a rough cut. Much of it was finely cut and carefully put together. I sent it to my thesis committee and showed it to a handful of friends.

At this point, I was nervous about confusing myself. I know that getting notes can sometimes throw off my sense of what I already know. There were moments that I already knew didn't work, but I knew that if someone said something positive about them, I'd be tempted to think they were fine as they were. And if I got prescriptive feedback about how things *should* be, I'd be tempted to forget what I thought I knew.

This time, though, I was lucky. I got a couple of extremely specific and helpful notes from Teresa Hubbard, one of the members of my thesis committee. She noted that the Byron character wasn't quite there. I needed to revisit how I'd edited him to make the performance stronger. And one of the most pivotal scenes, the midpoint of the movie when Jackie tells Sue Ellen what happened between her and Mr. Taylor, didn't have the emotional impact it should.

So I struck out on a mission to solve these problems. I revisited the hallway scene in which Byron really threatens Sue Ellen – the squeaky dolly scene – and realized I'd done it all wrong. I'd cut it up, using our added coverage to make the scene continuous and to avoid a couple of camera issues. But it made Joe's performance of Byron inconsistent and unbelievable. I

rewatched all of the takes. I tried cut after cut. And in the end, I realized that that first successful take – the first take without squeaks and without lost lines – that was the answer. There was one moment in it when Joe stumbled across his lines, but it happened as he turned away, so I was able to replace the line with another take. Then, miraculously, the single take worked.

The bigger problem, at that point was that moment between the sisters. Jackie telling her story had to mean something, or Sue Ellen's reaction to it would fall apart, the film would lose momentum and meaning. I tried re-editing with different takes. I tried holding in two-shots. I tried inserting audio from Mr. Taylor. And then I had the idea you see now in the final version. As Jackie tells her story, we relive Sue Ellen going to Mr. Taylor's classroom. It's a combination of reconsidering her interactions with him and imagining Sue Ellen in Jackie's shoes. It builds in a surreal element that, for me anyway, works.

The next cut of the film had the first attempt at a score. By this point it was July, and I was worried about deadlines, and I was still not sure what the score for the film needed to be. The burst of inspiration I'd been counting on never came, and suddenly, it felt too late to work with a composer. It wouldn't have been impossible, but it wasn't ideal. I talked to a few people who thought they could do it, but there wasn't time for much of a collaboration and there wasn't time for many drafts, so instead, I started playing around with library music. Rachel Bardin (DP) suggested the composer Kai Engel, and I downloaded everything he'd ever done and started experimenting. The final music is built out of his library. It's big and I'm sure some people won't like it, but the tone of it felt right to me after so many months of thinking nothing would be right.

It was at this point that I started getting notes that I'm sure I'll continue to get as people watch the film. One note was that the ending was unacceptable. I heard this twice. The issue was

that Sue Ellen resorts to a terrible, violent act and that is the "resolution" of the film. I was warned that she would be unredeemable. At that very first production meeting, where I talked to the crew about the production philosophy and the story and everything else, I also presented a "director's note." It said this:

> *Bad Things is a movie about anger. It's a movie about the moments that build into the slow realization that the world isn't fair. And then the insult-to-injury: the people who make the world unfair will never have to come to this realization. The perpetrators, the benefactors of the imbalance will never be forced to care that the world is unfair and will never willfully acknowledge it.*
>
> *The finale of the film – Sue Ellen's attempted poisoning of her bully – is not meant to condone violence or promote it as a solution to the world's problems. It's a drastic act from the mind of an 8-year-old. It's an illustration of the anger that most of us have all-too-often felt and ignored.*

Honestly, I don't think that the movie I made is necessarily about anger, and I think my summary here of what this movie is about isn't exactly right, but my point really, is that I am aware and have been aware from the beginning that I am presenting something morally unacceptable.

Figure 15: Sue Ellen walks away from Byron (film still)

I understand that by giving her this action, I'm culpable as the screenwriter for her downfall. But the illegitimacy and inadequacy of this revenge are what drew me to it. My point is not that her problems will now be solved; my point is that her position in the world is unfairly weighted toward failure.

I held a rough cut screening on July 19th. It was a last minute thing, thrown together in a fit when I realized I needed to find out what reactions would be. I invited the crew, old professors, my students and my cohort. I sent out texts and emails starting at about 11am and at 3pm, we had a rough cut screening with 12 people. I didn't realize it until later, since I was shaking with nervousness about showing a rough cut to a room of people, but it was a moment that proved to me that there was a community of supportive people at the University of Texas.

I printed out a (probably too long) series of questions and asked everyone to write down answers. I asked general questions like, "What is the story?" and "Anything confusing?", and I asked about each of the characters in turn ("How do you feel about so-and-so? How would you describe him/her?"). There were also questions very specifically about the end of the movie.

"Do you think Sue Ellen's actions are justified?" That was a question I asked. My thinking was that her actions were obviously not justified, but that this question was also a marker of whether or not people were writing her off as a psychopath at the end of the film. Because that, really, is what I'm worried about. If people leave this film sounding like Byron ("she's a psycho,") then I've failed.

The responses to that question, though, were all over the place: an enthusiastic YES!, plenty of uncertain "to her, maybe" and a few solid Not really's. Despite most of the answers

being versions of “it’s complicated”, I tried separating the responses into kind-of-yes and kind-of-no piles. They were split down the middle.

I also asked “What do you think happened at the end of the film?”, to which people had a variety of responses. Some thought Sue Ellen definitely killed Byron. Some weren’t sure. Pretty much everyone agreed she was scared at the end of the film and possibly running for help.

The rough cut screening concluded with a discussion of what wasn’t working (stylistic issues, pacing issues, etc.) and then a round of thank-you drinks at the Hole In The Wall.

From there, I moved into making adjustments, cutting down scenes, and coming to terms with the ways in which this movie will be criticized. I expect some to have a problem with the end. I’m sure that some will say this wasn’t my story to tell, as a white director making a movie about a black family. I’m sure that if it gets seen at all, this movie will be loved and hated in ways I couldn’t anticipate.

The thing about finishing a movie is that it just happens. You want it to be climactic, as if the pace of filmmaking could match the structure of a well-told story. But by the end of it all, locking the edit and calling it a movie are the least exciting moments of the whole thing.

How’s the movie going?

Oh. It’s done.

CHAPTER TEN

References

In this chapter, misleadingly titled "References," I've created a list of items that I think are relevant to the making of this project. Some of them are things I read while I was writing, some are things I actually referenced in this report, and some are just relevant.

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